DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 265 HE 028 378

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TITLE How I Feel Can Make a Difference in How I See You Teach.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Pragmatics (Champaign, IL, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; *College Students; Cultural Differences; Educational Attitudes; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Teaching Assistants; *Teaching Skills

ABSTRACT

This study surveyed undergraduate students and graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) to determine how the attitudes of both groups influenced student evaluations of the performance of foreign and domestic (American) TAs. A total of 278 undergraduates, 29 foreign TAs, and 33 domestic TAs participated in the survey. It found the strongest correlations between the overall teaching skills evaluations of the foreign TAs and the undergraduates' perception of their TAs as a professor or instructor, and the overall teaching skills evaluations of the domestic TAs and the undergraduates' perception of their TAs as instructors. Other results are discussed. An appendix contains copies of the undergraduate and TA survey questionnaires. (MDM)

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ED 383 265

How I Feel Can Make a Difference in How I See You Teach

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Running head: INFLUENCE OF FTAs', DTAs' ON STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING SKILLS

IR 0228 378

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether first, students', and second, TAs' (FTAs' and DTAs') attitudes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) influence the evaluations of the students' teaching skills. The attitudes include those of consumerism, ethnocentrism, openness to cultures different from their own, and ideas about training (preparation) of the TAs for the job. The results showed that there are some significant correlations between the teaching skills evaluations and the attitudes--first, of the TAs, and second, of the students of the TAs--that could be used to warn TAs during training programs as well as people who are responsible for the rehiring of the TAs. These significant correlations could also help in creating introductory programs for freshmen by making them understand better the importance of the role of the TA as well as the different classroom behaviors between FTAs (Foreign TAs) and DTAs (Domestic TAs).

How I Feel Can Make a Difference

in How I See You Teach

Sampling

The students' sample consists of undergraduate students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The TAs' sample consists of DTAs and FTAs who are employees at the UIUC. The Survey Research Lab and the Department of Statistics along with the Division of Management Information at the UIUC agreed that 30 TAs was the minimum necessary for a reliable sample from each population of TAs. Since it was expected that some TAs would not wish to participate in the study, it was decided to approach 38 of each type instead of 30 that was considered at the beginning. Next, it was desirable to have 6 students from each of the 60 TAs' classes fill out the student questionnaire, for a total of $x = 360$ students' responses--180 students for each type of TA (FTAs/DTAs). It was felt by the above departments and the researcher that six students from each class would give a good representation of the perception of the TA. In order, though, to plan for students not responding, each TA was asked to distribute the questionnaire to eight students, randomly selected by the researcher, instead of six.

Students and TAs were drawn from the departments of Economics, Classics, Anthropology, History, Biology, Mathematics, Philosophy, Religious studies, and Speech Communication.

The DEI (Division of Management Information) ascertained that in these departments there was a balanced number between DTAs and FTAs who taught 100-200 level courses. Higher level courses usually create a bias in the evaluations because students register for them because they like them. The list of the employed TAs at the UIUC with the class type, size and ethnic background was provided by a specific TA program written by the DEI to select from the pool of TAs randomly an equal number of FTAs and DTAs from

the departments above, using only TAs who taught sections of 30 to 40 students.

Letters were sent by the researcher to the heads of different departments informing them about the project. Written consents were obtained from the heads of the departments during personal meetings with them. The TAs received letters with a description of the research and all the relevant information, along with a copy of the written consent of the Head of their Departments. The TAs were contacted three days after they received the letters to inform the researcher if they agreed to participate. If they did, each TA was interviewed separately and the sample was randomized from his/her roster. Also each TA was given the eight questionnaires to give them to the students. The questionnaires would be returned to the researcher and not to the TA. The return address was on the back of the questionnaire, so all that they had to do was to fold it and mail it by campus mail.

In this research, students of Foreign Teaching Assistants are defined as those who have teaching assistants who do not have American English as their native language. TAs who are naturalized citizens of the USA but whose first language is not American English were treated as foreign. TAs who were just permanent residents without having American English as their first language were considered foreign also. There were no cases of TAs who were Native Speakers of American English but not U.S. citizens, or native speakers of American English and residents but not citizens. British, Canadians, South Africans, or Australians were treated as foreign TAs.

In all, 278 students responded from which 136 had FTAs and 143 had DTAs. There were 29 Foreign TAs and 33 Domestic. Regarding randomness, apart from students of different departments, the student sample includes students of different status, different categories of self-reported GPAs, expected grades, and ethnic backgrounds. It also includes approximately an equal number of men and women. The TAs sample consists also of different

departments as their students', different years of being TAs' different countries, and native languages and also includes men and women.

Instrument, Variables, and Values

The same attitudes were included in both questionnaires-TAs' and students' (see Appendix A). Both types of variables were chosen based on the complaints students, TAs, and administration had expressed in the Daily Illini (the campus newspaper at the UIUC) and relevant research in other universities (Orth 1982, Davis 1984, Bailey 1982) had considered as important.

Attitudinal Variables (TAs' and Students' Questionnaires)

Attitudes are defined to be a person's position or disposition towards something that may be physical, mental, or emotional. They may include "conscious mental positions as well as a full range of often subconscious feelings or emotions" (Savignon, 1983, p. 302; here, the definition is adapted to include the view of what is considered attitudes). The attitudes examined in this research are mental/emotional predispositions rather than physical. All the attitudinal questions, except item 1 were constructed by the researcher.

For the attitudinal items two kinds of scoring were used, the first had four values and the second two: The first scores are from 1 to 4; the higher they are, the more negative the answer is to the question that coded the attitudinal variable, that is:

1 = Strongly Agree 4 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Agree 3 = Disagree

The second scores are 1 and 2 and have the following values: 1 = Yes, 2 = No.

A discussion of the attitudinal variables, the numbers of the questions by which they have been coded, the scales used, and what the high

scores for each question or scales mean is presented. If the scores were reversed for statistical purposes, this is also mentioned.

The interpretations of the scores below have been given after changes, if any, have been made.

1. Ethnocentricism (item 1, scores 1-4.). Ethnocentrism is the emotional attitude that one's own ethnic group, nation or culture is superior to all others. The question was developed by Professor Lambert (McGill University, Canada, Department of Linguistics) and was adjusted somewhat to fit our study. High scores on this item mean high ethnocentrism (the range of scores has been reversed).

2. Attitude toward students' training, items 2 and 12, each scores 1 to 4. Items 2 and 19 were combined into a single scale labeled consumerism. A low score on this scale for a student meant that the student did not think that students in general should be given training which would contribute to better communications with FTAs, and thus that they had the typical attitude of the consumer. For TAs, high scores will show that from their perspective, the students' consumerism is not legitimate and students need training. (The score range of each of the scale items 2 and 19 were reversed.)

3. Attitudes toward TAs' screening, item 3, scores 1 to 4. High scores mean strong agreement that TAs need screening. (The range of scores were reversed.)

4. Attitudes toward TAs' training item 4, scores 1 to 4. High scores mean strong agreement that TAs need training. (The range of scores were reversed).

5. Attitudes toward status of TAs; items 5a, b, c, scores 1 to 4. High scores in these items show that there is strong perception of TAs as students or instructors or professors. (The range of scores was reversed.)

6. Attitudes toward importance of TAs' role in the university education, item 6, scores 1 to 4. High scores mean lack of importance. (The range of scores was not reversed.)

7. Attitudes toward prestige of the TAs' position item 7, scores 1 to 4. High scores mean lots of prestige. (The range of scores was not reversed.)

8. Attitudes toward cultural openness items 8a, b scores1 and 2. High scores mean problems with cultural openness. (The range of scores was not reversed.)

Regarding the definition of culture that this research is using, it is directly connected with anthropology and the researcher followed the definition by Gamst and Norbeck (cited in Spradley, 1975) who state that:

> culture is viewed as man's way of maintaining life and perpetuating his species, a system of learned and socially transmitted ideas, sentiments, social arrangements, and objects that depend for their formulation and continuation upon man's ability to create symbols. (Spradley, 1975, p. 5)

Contrary to what most people believe, culture is not the behaviors themselves. It is the acquisition of a body of knowledge through and by which one interprets experiences and generate behaviors.

Teaching Skills Variables

Items 10 to 18 were taken from the Instructional Computerized Evaluation System (ICES) which is used in the UIUC for the semester evaluations of Faculty and TAs. Items 19 to 21 were constructed by the researcher. Items 10 to 18 have the values very Good, Good, Poor, Very Poor (1-4). Items 19 to 21 have as values Almost Always Offer, Sometimes, Almost Never (1-4).

Presentation Skills

The main presentation skills tested in this research, are clarity and knowledge of the subject itself.

Clarity

Clarity involves:

1. TAs' ability to answer questions, item 10, scores1 to 4. High scores show good Clarity skills (scores range was reversed).

2. TAs' ability to explain difficult materials with the use of clear and simple examples, the definition of terms, concepts, and principles. Item 11, scores 1-4. High scores show good skills on this item (scores range was reversed).

3. Eye contact 12, scores 1-4. High scores on this item show good skills on this item (scores range was reversed).

Items 10, 11, 12 constitute the scale (scale 6) of clarity. High scores on clarity show good clarity skills.

The Knowledge of the Subject

The degree of knowledge the instructor had about the subject when he/she was lecturing or during one-on-one sessions with his/her students, or during question-answer situations in class. Item 13, scores 1-4. High scores on this scale show good subject knowledge. (The scores range has been reversed.)

Course Management Skills

Under this type of skills, the following was examined:

1. TAs' daily preparation, item 14, scores 1 to 4. High scores show good skills on this item. (The range of scores has been reversed.)

2. TAs' objectives/purposes, item 15, scores 1-4. High scores show good skills on this item. (The range of scores has been reversed.)

3. TAs' course organization, item 16, scores 1-4. High scores show good skills on this item. (The range of scores has been reversed.) Items 14-16 give another scale, the course management skills (scale 7). High scores on course management show high skills on this variable. (The range of the scores was reversed.)

TAs' grading, item 17, scores 1-4. This item includes fairness of grading of quizzes and exams. High scores on this item mean high skills on this variable. (The range of the scores was reversed.)

TAs' overall teaching skills, item 18, scores 1 to 4. This item measures the overall TA's teaching ability. High scores show high skills on this item. (The range of the scores was reversed.)

Classroom control. The researcher is interested in seeing how students feel about their TAs' control in class, and how TAs evaluate themselves on this issue too. It is tested with the following items:

1. Loss of control due to lack of knowledge of English language, item 19, scores 1 to 4, or

2. Loss of control due to lack of knowledge of subject, item 20, scores 1 to 4, or

3. Loss of control due to lack of knowledge of culture, item 21, scores 1-4.

Items 19-21 give us a new scale (scale 8) that was named classroom control scale. High scores in this scale (as in each separate item) show good classroom control from the part of the TA. (The score range in the items and the scale have not been reversed.)

All the above items and scales from 10-21 give the scale number 9, which is the teaching skills scale. High scores show good teaching skills.

Statistical Analysis

First, the T-tests and two-way ANOVA analyses were run for the students' data for every teaching variable and attitude to control for subject i.e., Hard versus Soft Science. Hard Science included Math, Biology, and the remainder was included under Soft Science, grade, and if the course is taken as requirement for their major of the students or it is an elective. They did not show any influence, and this led us to the second step; the calculation of the correlations between students' evaluations and TAs' and students' attitudes. The results of the correlations are shown in

Tables 1 and 2. In Tables 1 and 2 only correlation coefficients in absolute value are listed (the level taken is bigger or equal to 0.250.) The p value for all the correlations was .05 or less.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

From Table 1, it can be seen clarity, course management, and overall teaching skills are correlated strongly and significantly with status of the instructor and professor, while clarity and overall teaching skills are also correlated strongly with the role of importance. The strongest of all is teaching skills with the image of professor (r=0.352). The higher the image, the higher the teaching skills evalautions or vis-à-vis.

In the DTAs' students, clarity and overall teaching skills are associated either with importance of role or status (of instructor only, not professor as in FTAs' students). The strongest is the overall teaching skills correlation with the status of instructor (r=0.458)(see Table 2).

From Table 2, it can be seen that specific TAs' attitudes, like how much confidence he/she has in the prestige of what she/he is doing, or how much he/she desires to go through screening, or Ethnocentrism can influence students' evaluations of teaching skills. There are some reservations in explaining these variables as directly influencing evaluations since there should be some specific behaviors by which they are transferred to the students. Which are these behaviors? It is what we call in statistics "the third variable" between two correlated ones which due to lack of research precedent in these types of strategies of transferring TAs' attitudinal influences on students, it is still a mystery.

In addition, from the comparisons between the correlations of the group of FTAs' attitudes with their students' evalautions and the group of DTAs' attitudes and their students' evaluations, the researcher found correlations of Teaching skills with Ethnocentrism that present a very

interesting way of showing how students' evaluations can be different depending on if the TA is foreign or Domestic.

The DTAs' Ethnocentrism is related to teaching skills and particularly to clarity, course management, and overall teaching skills. Since same significant correlations do not exist in the FTAs, it can be assumed that the FTAs may be at a disadvantage, not only because they may not feel comfortable to show ethnocentrism in their work environment, but that their ethnocentrism, even if shown, might not have the same results on the students' evaluations with the DTAs' ethnocentrism since it will not be an ethnocentrism for the USA but for their own country. On the other hand, if ethnocentrism is another form of self-confidence--parallel to what was found in the prestige above--on which high evaluations of Clarity, Course Management, and Teaching Skills may depend, then the FTAs may never have this experience of self-confidence; thus the above evaluations of students will not be high scored because they will not be influenced by such FTAs' attitudes.

Discussion

From the results we conclude that as far as how students' attitudes influence students' evaluations of their TAs, it was found that the strongest correlation, first, in the FTAs' students, is the one between the overall Teaching Skills evaluations and the students' perception of their instructor as professor or instructor. In the DTAs' students, it is the one between the overall teaching skills and the students' perception of their TAs' as instructors. One can see the difference in the images between the two group of students (see G. Smyrniou 1993). The fact that DTAs' students share a common culture with their DTAs could be a reason. It could also be the way the different TAs (FTAs and DTAs) carry themselves in the classroom. The FTAs give the impression of an authority close to the professor, but the DTAs may have more the one of the group attitude thus more proximity is established between them and their students and that is why they are not

seen as professors. In the TAs' attitudes and the students' evaluations, it was found that the FTAs attitudes toward TAs' screening and their students' evaluations regarding their TAs' Classroom control is the strongest and most significant correlation, while in the DTAs' students and DTAs, the evaluations of these TAs' Course Management by their students and their TAs' ethnocentrism is the strongest and most significant correlation.

Though from the eight attitudes only three in each case (i.e., first students and second students and TAs) seemed to be significantly and strongly correlated with evaluations the numbers should not be used to dismiss possibilities since these findings, do shed considerable light on how some of the students' predispositions relate to their evalautions and how students in their evalautions respond to the attitudes of the TAs, which should be taken under consideration in the rehiring of the TAs; since in most institutions the rehiring is based on students' evalautions. Some of the correlations of FTAs and their students' evaluations from this research are useful for researchers and program developers when dealing with the accommodation theories and issues; that is, TAs can have positive effect on their students by accommodating themselves to meet the needs of their students. The positive correlation of the variable that involves FTAs' desire to be screened for verbal and teaching skills with students' good classroom control evaluations (i.e., the more the TAs ask for control, the better the classroom control evaluations) may mean that the TAs' acceptance to go through screening may be an accommodation that will help TAs fulfill the students' expectations of the FTAs' classroom control.

The same interpretation may be applied for the correlation of clarity and prestige perceiving prestige as raising of TAs' self-confidence in their job. Notice though that a program to train TAs to believe in their Job will probably be very complex since there may not be an easy way to teach these intangible skills to the FTAs. First, because research is needed to find which are the behavioral characteristics of such a TA that can be taught to

the others; and second, because the prestige of the TAs' job need to be reinforced by the Academia and the students, in a system that does not assign any de facto prestige to the TAs' job but is earned (despite the fact that sometimes it is not given though the efforts of a TA may be worth it). This does not mean that FTAs and DTAs cannot be prepared or at least warned adequately about such existing relations through a broader training program for TAs.

Similarly, in the introductory programs for freshmen the importance (Educational and Financial) of the TAs' job could be made known and the possible different behaviors (based on the attitudes in the above significant correlations) between FTAs and DTAs could be stated.

Author's Note

The author would like to thank Professor Klaus Witz for serving as a reader and give him credit for the statistical direction of this research.

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Table 1

Significantly Strong Correlations of FTAs' and DTAs' Students' Evaluations and Attitudes

Students' evaluations and attitudes	r
1. FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' clarity and FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' status as similar to that of instructor/professor	0.312/0.319
2. FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' course management and FTAs' perceptions of FTAs' status as similar to that of professor/instructor	0.287/0.321
3. FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' teaching skills and FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' status as similar to that of professor/instructor	0.352/0.329
4. FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' clarity and FTAs' students' perceptions of importance of FTAs' role	-0.300
5. FTAs' students' perceptions of FTAs' teaching skills and FTAs' students' perceptions of importance of FTAs' role	-0.280
DTAs' students' evaluations and attitudes:	
1. DTAs' students' perceptions of DTAs' clarity/course management/teaching skills with DTAs' students' perceptions of DTAs' status as similar to that of instructor	0.445/0.425/0.458
2. DTAs' students' perceptions of DTAs' clarity/teaching skills with DTAs' students' perceptions of DTAs' importance of role	-0.289/-0.281

Table 2

Significantly Strong Correlations of Students' Evaluations and TAs' Attitudes

Evaluations of FTAs' students and FTAs	r
1. FTAs' students' perception of FTAs' classroom control with FTAs' attitudes toward screening	0.423
2. FTAs' students' perception of their FTAs' clarity with FTAs' attitude toward possible prestige they think that their job has	-0.395
Evaluations of DTAs' students and DTAs	**r**
1. DTAs' students' evaluations of DTAs' clarity and DTAs' attitude toward ethnocentrism	0.395
2. DTAs' students' evaluations of DTAs' course management and DTAs' attitude toward ethnocentrism	0.415
3. DTAs' students' perception of DTAs' teaching skills and DTAs' attitude toward ethnocentrism	0.361

Appendix A

STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

1. According to you opinion do you think the USA is the best country to live in?

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

2. Students need to have training sessions on how to tolerate differences between their background and their TAs' background

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

3. TAs should be screened regarding their verbal and teaching skills before they are employed

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

4. TAs should go through training before they start teaching in order to be more effective teachers in class

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

5.a I view my TA as a student

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

b. I view my TA as an instructor

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

c. I view my TA as a professor

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

6. TAs serve an important role in the University's Educational system

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

7. TAs lack prestige in the University

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

8. I like/would like to have the opportunity of being taught by a TA from another country

Yes (1) No (2)

9. Students should have training in hoe to understand foreign or dialectal accents.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4

10. How would you rate your TA's overall ability to answer questions?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

11. How would you rate your TA's overall ability to explain difficult materials to his/her students?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

12. How would you rate your TA's establishment and maintenance of eye contact with his/her student?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

13. How would you rate your TA's overall knowledge of the subject of this course?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

14. How would you rate your TA's daily preparation for the class?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

15. How would you rate your TA's understanding of the purposes and learning objectives of the course?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

16. How would you rate your TA's general course organization?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

17. How would you rate your TA's overall teaching ability?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

18. How would you rate your TA's grading of tests and homework?

Very Good Good Poor Very Poor
1 2 3 4

In questions 19-21, control means that the TA can give and maintain proper direction of the discussions/lectures and that she/he can create decent atmosphere among students and between students and himself/herself.

19. Your TA loses control in class because she/he does not know the language (American English) well enough to express himself/herself clearly

Almost	Often	Sometimes	Almost Never
1	2	3	4

20. Your TA loses control in class because she/he does not know well enough the subject he/she is teaching

Almost	Often	Sometimes	Almost Never
1	2	3	4

21. Your TA loses control in class because she/he does not know well enough the students' culture or ethnic background

Almost	Often	Sometimes	Almost Never
1	2	3	4

22. What is your ethnic background?_____

23. What is your status in the UIUC (Freshman, Sophomore etc)_____

24. What is your GPA_____

25. What grade do you expect to receive in this course?_____

26. Is this course required for your major?

Yes	No
1	2

27. What is your sex? M_____F_____

TAs' QUESTIONNAIRE

1. The country of which you are a citizen is the best country to live in

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4

2. Students need to have training sessions on how to tolerate differences between their background and their TAs' background

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4

3. TAs' should be screened regarding their verbal and teaching skills before they are employed

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	2	3	4

4. TAs' should go through training before they start teaching in order to be more effective teachers in class

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

5a. I perceive myself as a student

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

5b. I perceive myself as an instructor

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

5c. I perceive myself as a professor

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

6. TAs serve an important role in the University

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

7. The TA position lacks prestige

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

8. I like/would like to have the opportunity to teach students from another country Yes (1) No (2)

9. Students should have training sessions in how to tolerate different dialectal or foreign accents.

Strongly Agree (1) Agree (2) Disagree (3) Strongly Disagree (4)

10. What is your area of specialization?_____

11. What is your native language_____

12. How long have you being teaching as a TA?_____

13. What other languages do you speak apart from English?_____

14. What country are you from?_____

15a. Are you a foreign TA?_____
15b. Are you a permanent resident but not citizen?_____

16. What is your sex_____